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AN
ENQUIRY
INTO THE
PRETENSIONS
OF
RICHARD BROTHERS,
IN
ANSWER
TO
NATHANIEL BRASSEY HALHED.

BY A FREETHINKER.

On hearing an ignorant Enthusiast transgressing in this Way, we can allow ourselves to be amused; but when we see Men of Genius and superiour Abilities busied in the same Manner, we must lament the Talents thus unluckily misguided.

ESSAY on the Nature and Existence of a MATERIAL WORLD.

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AN
ENQUIRY
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OF
RICHARD BROTHERS.

AMONG the many things which disgrace the annals of this country during the present century, the attempt of prophet Brothers and his disciple Halhed, will not want success in exciting the surprise and contempt of posterity.

As the age of chivalry is gone—as the age of priestcraft and superstition is going, one might have hoped that the age of miracle and imposition was not likely to be revived. It is indeed, strange, that any man in his senses should, in this enlightened age, be ambitious of the name and character of a Prophet; that he should venture to travel beyond the bounds of nature into unknown and unknowable regions, in order to establish his fame upon the ignorance, weakness, and delusion of mankind.

Equally strange it may appear to men of common sense, that there should be found at the close of the eighteenth century, a cool deliberate answer to such folly and stupidity. The turn, however, which that answer will take, may, perhaps, justify the attempt, and prevent the necessity of any future refutation of inspiration, prophecies, and miracles. Had Mr. Brothers given his prophecies the more humble name of predictions; had he left out his pretensions to such high blood and remote connexions, instead of an impostor or a madman, he might have passed for a philosopher, who, having observed the same causes produce the same effects in all ages, ventures to augur events the most disastrous and calamitous, from the bloody and accursed war in which Europe is at present involved.

Mr. Brothers sets out with informing us, in order that we may give more implicit credence to his prophecies, that he is the Nephew of God, that he is utterly invulnerable to all human power. The latter of these assertions may be easily proved, and the former, I believe, will make very little impression on any man in his right senses; but let us see how Mr. Halhed makes this out, and whether a common conveyancer would not detect such an error in the pedigree, as intirely to overthrow any claim to inheritance. In the first place, says our author, nobody will deny that Jesus Christ is God Almighty: It is well known, that Jesus Christ had brothers and sisters, whose children were,

were, of course, his nephews, and in the line of filiation, a pedigree has been preserved, for nearly two thousand years, to prove Richard Brothers a lineal descendant from the first Propositus.

As to his position that Jesus Christ was God Almighty, not being a divine, I neither presume to admit or deny, though to my common understanding, I could as easily conceive the Prince of Wales to be King George the Third; but because Mary had children by Joseph, after the birth of Jesus Christ, I do positively deny that they were, therefore, his brothers and sisters, capable of inheriting his estate, because, at best, they could only be related by the mother's side, and the nature of the estate was such as intirely to shut them out from all inheritance. I believe, the most strenuous advocates for the immaculate virginity of Mary, have never yet allowed her one spark of the divine nature in herself, at least, if there be any that have, the Church of England certainly does not pay her that compliment, and Jesus Christ having been begotten by the Holy Ghost, received all the divinity with which he was clothed from his Father, and not one particle of it from his Mother, who never had any thing divine in her, till the Holy Ghost "came upon her, and the power of the Highest overshadowed her," and which left her entirely in the manger, at the birth of her Son; and as we have no accounts of his ever having any children, it is certain the property of divinity and inspiration, could have lineally descended

to no one upon earth, for though Joseph did not hesitate to take to his wife, after she had had a child by the Holy Ghost, and raise up children, from whom Mr. Brothers pretends to be descended, yet they not inheriting any divinity from their Father or Mother, or their *half-brother*, from whom I have already proved they could not inherit any, and who does not appear at his death to have bequeathed them any, could not possibly transmit it to their children; so that Mr. Brothers had better try his claim upon some other grounds, for on this it cannot stand a moment. But leaving such trash and nonsense to the quirks and quibbles of lawyers and divines, let us examine Mr. Brothers's and all other impostor's pretensions upon a broader principle; and here I must advert to the arguments of that great and immortal man, David Hume. A spirit of prophecy supposes something miraculous and supernatural, which is a direct violation of the laws of nature; this cannot be very easily conceived, except by those who think the suspension of the laws of nature as easy, and attended with as little danger to the general order of the universe, as the suspension of the Habeas Corpus is to the liberties of Englishmen.

What does Mr. Hume say on this subject? He says this, "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact

“ fact, is as entire as any argument from experience
 “ can possibly be imagined.*” Before I should give
 my credence to prophecies, I should be as unreason-
 able as J. J. Rousseau, who requires to be present
 when the prophecy is made, and also when it is ful-
 filled ; and not satisfied with this, he tells us, he would
 not even then believe it to be miraculous and super-
 natural, unless it were proved to a moral certainty,
 that “ the event which he had witnessed, could not
 “ have taken place in the ordinary course of things.”

Such, alas! is the dilemma to which every commu-
 nity that establishes its religion on prophecy, miracles,
 revelation, and divine interposition is reduced, that
 it will be ever subject to Prophets, who call them-
 selves the sons, nephews, cousins, or some other
 relation of God, and the delusion under which the
 members labour, will make them an almost certain
 prey to the doctrines of ingenious impostors; nor do
 I see how the believers in prophecy and miracle,
 without great sophistry, can get out of the corner into
 which these two champions of imposition and ab-
 surdity have driven them.

For if you once admit Daniel to have been a Pro-
 phet, and that those frantic visions were the effect of

* The whole of this incomparable essay is so complete an answer
 to all impostors, whether ancient or modern, that I shall affix it to
 this Pamphlet, well knowing the impossibility of using better argu-
 ments, or of enforcing them with such clearness and elegance of lan-
 guage.

divine inspiration given him by a Being existing in those regions, which the most determined and unwearied travellers have hitherto never been able to approach, to whom the future is always present, of whom, from human experience, we cannot form the most remote idea, to whom all nations have bowed and offered sacrifices, either as the idol of their imaginations or their hands, who is not to be discovered by sensation or perception, and who eludes the most subtle researches that the mind of man is capable of making; admitting this, Why might not Mr. Brothers declare these prophecies to be now fulfilling in as unqualified and presumptuous a manner as any other man that does or ever did exist; and what is to prevent Mr. Halhed disciplined, as he says he is, “ in the occupation of decyphering mysterious and “ allegorical modes of composition;” his head, though not crammed with our own sacred writings, yet ready to burst with those of the “ Old Hindus,” discovering “ with infinite pains the true meaning of the Hindú “ triad of energies and power, Brahma, Vishnu, and “ Shiva,” performing many mighty exploits with “ matter, space, and time,” and at last, “ elucidating “ all the surviving remains of genuine Brachmanical “ mythology.” What I say, is to prevent such a man with words big and hard enough to establish his relationship with heaven, and certainly with learning sufficient to stamp the reputation of fifty Prophets, or to lay all the Ghosts in Christendom, from proving “ by scientific process,” and almost ocular demonstration

stration, the assertions of his master? What is to prevent his having the "Clue," his knowing the true "*mot de l'énigme*", and expounding the secrets to which it applies, as well as any other conjuror or ænigmatist that ever deceived and laughed at the credulity of the world.

But, says the Divine, unable to get out of the corner, those in whom I believe were neither conjurors or ænigmatists, they were sent from God, they were inspired by Him, they were empowered by Him to overturn all nature, and, in short, to do what they please, whereas these men are mere impostors. With all due deference to that large wig, may I not humbly ask, Upon what grounds he believes one set of pretenders true, and another false? Unless I am much mistaken, the very arguments he would use to prove the truth of the one, would go to establish the veracity of the other, as those he must use to overturn the pretensions of false Prophets, must necessarily destroy the pretensions of the true. Why then the testimony which I have, says he, is sufficient to satisfy my mind. What! will the concordant or discordant testimony of four men, of forty, nay, of four hundred, make you believe what you know to be impossible, and what you cannot conceive? Can you think it more probable that these impossibilities should have happened, than that the historians should have told lies, or have been mistaken? Here the Divine flies into a passion, raises the mighty arm of orthodoxy and authority,
knocks

knocks down the sceptical rascals that pen him up; and launches again into the ocean of absurdity, daring to

———“ Tempt with wandering feet,
 “ The dark, unbottomed, infinite abyfs,
 “ And through the palpable obscure, find out
 “ His uncouth way.*”

Hence it is, that impostors are let loose upon the world; here they rest as on a rock that cannot be shaken, without the great fabric of received opinions tumbling to the ground.

Why then let it fall! it cannot be propped up much longer, and from its ruins truth will arise arrayed in all the beauty and purity of reason.

Were not the system of error and delusion kept up in religion as well as politics, there would be no necessity for Mr. Halhed to advise Government, to “ attend to the irritation these forebodings may produce on the public mind;” for, says he, if you attempt to dispute with Mr. Brothers, his answer is, “ *search the Scriptures yourselves.* As Christians, you must acknowledge them to be the perfect sources of all veracity, and let them be the touchstone of my assertions.”

It is also by puzzling them with the mysteriousness and incomprehensibility of their religion, and by

* Milton.

harassing

barassing and exhausting them with wars, that Mr. Halhed is enabled to cast the following reflection upon the people. “ The great mass of the people too sore with their sufferings, not to grasp at any offer of consolation, and too credulous to form accurate notions of its origin, is easily worked upon by every species of oracular pretension; and we all know, that when men are once steadily persuaded of the authenticity of a prophecy, they are almost involuntarily led to perform their part towards its completion.”

Having examined the pretensions of our prophet and his disciple, and shewn the inextricable difficulties to which religionists are exposed; let us now enquire into the intrinsic merits of Mr. Halhed's book, divesting it, as all such books ought to be, of its divine inspiration. On the first perusal of that book, considering the scholar-like manner in which it is written, and struck as every man must be with the beauty and elegance of the stile; I certainly did believe, that the author excelled all other men in irony; and in that sense, I venture to pronounce it the severest satire that ever was written upon prophecies and miracles; but when I heard from indubitable authority that nothing was more remote from the author's intentions than irony and satire, I could not help exclaiming with Festus, Halhed! “ thou art beside thyself, much learning hath made thee mad.”

To

To the first five pages, no real friend to his country will, I believe, withhold assent.

The clear, concise, elegant manner in which he treats the question of peace or war, the arguments which he adduces to shew the immediate necessity of the former, and the imminent danger in a rash and wilful perseverance in the latter, cannot be passed by, without much well-merited encomium on the author. But had he treated this subject with infinitely more skill and judgment, or in ten thousand times more brilliant and beautiful language than he has, he would not have so much prejudiced me in his favour, as to have gained my credence and approbation to the trash which follows.

And here let it be considered, that there is no dream or vision which the wildest or most heated imagination can invent, which an ingenious man, and one who is "fortified with a pre-acquired aptitude in these studies," will not make applicable to any subject he pleases. How many absurd and ridiculous things have been proved by those to whom the true *mot de l'ænigme* has been revealed, and to whom the clue or "true key" has been given, from numerical letters in the Revelations. In this manner, I know not how many ways there are of proving the Pope to be the Devil, besides several other wonderful things, which having neither aptitude or partiality
for

for these studies, I cannot mention. In the first place, Mr. Brothers prognosticates fatal catastrophes to every King in Europe, and Mr. Halhed has discovered their fate to be unequivocally announced in the prophecies of Daniel and Esdras, particularly in the annihilation of the British Navy; but one of the Kings of Europe, never renowned for the "true spirit of prophetic lore, or the genuine spark of promethean fire," has prognosticated this very event himself, and in as unequivocal a manner as his imperfect rapidity and impediment of speech would allow him, in these well-known words. "What! What! if they go on at this rate, in thirty years they will not leave a King in Europe," and nothing in the page of history ever tended more to verify the predictions of his Majesty, than the conduct which the Kings of Europe have adopted for these last five years towards the French Revolution.

What man that had been accustomed to trace effects to their source, looking at the causes which produced that glorious event, and the rapid progress and extensive diffusion of human knowledge throughout Europe, would want the aid of divine inspiration to foresee the effects it must produce. What man that had been accustomed to exert his reasoning powers, when he beheld the Kings of Europe rising in dread array from their blood-stained thrones, affrighted at this prodigy of human wisdom, and trembling at the fate that awaited their own arbitrary power,

power, unsheath the hateful sword, and enter into a dark and foul conspiracy* to murder in its cradle the dreaded infant, who, in its fearful and defenceless state, terrified like the young Astyanax at the warlike appearance of Hector, retreats before their coward arms, clings to its mother's breast, and craves her protection; and when he beheld that mother, no less than a whole nation of four and twenty millions, roused with frantic agony for the safety of her offspring, swear to foster and defend it, or perish in its cause†; who, I say, could require the assistance of a divinity to predict the downfall of despotism in the contest?

What, though the nurses in this new and difficult situation should fall out and quarrel among themselves about the mode of its preservation, surrounded and beset as they were by external and internal enemies, they all agreed that liberty should be preserved, and that the machinations of its foes should return upon themselves with infamy, disgrace, and ruin.

If in this nefarious deed, England wantonly chose to take a part, and at length not only become herself a principal, but the great support, nay the very nerves and sinews of its continuance; if, after repeated warnings at home and defeats abroad she blindly persist till her enemies be at her gates, and till she be compelled to accept such terms as they shall think

* Treaty of Piltnitz.

† Vivre libre, ou mourir.

proper to dictate; does it require any preternatural light to foresee that they will never allow that navy to exist, which, instead of employing its tremendous power, as it ought to have done, in protecting the rights and independence of mankind, has scarcely ever been exerted, but in bullying or enslaving distant and neighbouring nations. To conclude: Mr. Brothers prophesies the destruction of the British Parliament, the city of London, and the whole British nation, and fixes so early a period as the month of June for its completion; although this dreadful event should actually take place at the time mentioned by this inspired writer, before I gave him credit for his inspiration, I should insist with my friend Rousseau, upon having it proved to a demonstration, that all this could not have been accomplished by human means; such is the unexampled energy of the French nation, the success and rapid progress of their arms in every quarter, and the discontents which are increasing to such an alarming degree among her enemies, together with a total want of any cause to call forth the like energy and exertion.

But were the British Parliament to come to an immediate declaration, that they had no right to interfere with the internal government of France; were they to acknowledge her Republic one and indivisible, - as the * best of British Patriots long since advised,

* Earl Stanhope.

and

and to express their readiness to enter into negotiations for a fair and honourable peace; were the means of corruption taken away and applied to better purposes; were that Parliament reformed of its enormous and acknowledged abuses, and purged of those men who make a merchandize of their souls, of those who infamously and audaciously dare enter that house as independent and faithful representatives of the people, and afterwards "crouch behind the Treasury-bench with their souls in their hands, like country girls in the market with their butter and eggs before them, anxiously waiting for the lucky moment, when the tellers would come and rid them of their burden, that they might go home and hide themselves," I would venture to predict, that the King, Parliament, and Constitution of this country, would, in spite of Mr. Brothers or Mr. Halhed, of Daniel or Esdras, not only survive the ensuing June, but many, many Junes to come.

T H E E N D.

H U M E ' S

HUME'S ESSAY

ON

MIRACLES.

THERE is, in Dr. TILLOTSON'S writings, an argument against the *real presence*, which is as concise, and elegant, and strong, as any argument can possibly be supposed against a doctrine so little worthy of a serious refutation. It is acknowledged on all hands, says that learned prelate, that the authority, either of the scripture or of tradition, is founded merely on the testimony of the apostles, who were eye-witnesses to those miracles of our Saviour, by which he proved his divine mission. Our evidence, then, for the truth of the *Christian* religion, is less than the evidence for the truth of our senses; because, even in the first authors of our religion, it was no greater; and it is evident it must diminish in passing from them to their disciples; nor can any one rest such confidence in their testimony, as in the immediate object of his senses. But a weaker evi-

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dence

dence can never destroy a stronger; and therefore, were the doctrine of the real presence ever so clearly revealed in scripture, it were directly contrary to the rules of just reasoning to give our assent to it. It contradicts sense, though both the scripture and tradition, on which it is supposed to be built, carry not such evidence with them as sense; when they are considered merely as external evidences, and are not brought home to every one's breast, by the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit.

Nothing is so convenient as a decisive argument of this kind, which must at least *silence* the most arrogant bigotry and superstition, and free us from their impertinent solicitations. I flatter myself, that I have discovered an argument of a like nature, which, if just, will, with the wise and learned, be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion, and consequently will be useful as long as the world endures. For so long, I presume, will the accounts of miracles and prodigies be found in all history, sacred and profane.

Though experience be our only guide in reasoning concerning matters of fact, it must be acknowledged, that this guide is not altogether infallible, but in some cases is apt to lead us into errors. One who, in our climate, should expect better weather in any week of JUNE than in one of DECEMBER, would reason

reason justly and conformably to experience; but it is certain, that he may happen, in the event, to find himself mistaken. However, we may observe, that in such a case, he would have no cause to complain of experience; because it commonly informs us beforehand of the uncertainty, by that contrariety of events, which we may learn from a diligent observation. All effects follow not with like certainty from their supposed causes. Some events are found, in all countries and all ages, to have been constantly conjoined together: Others are found to have been more variable, and sometimes to disappoint our expectations; so that in our reasonings concerning matter of fact, there are all imaginable degrees of assurance, from the highest certainty to the lowest species of moral evidence.

A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence. In such conclusions as are founded on an infallible experience, he expects the event with the last degree of assurance, and regards his past experience as a full *proof* of the future existence of that event. In other cases, he proceeds with more caution: He weighs the opposite experiments: He considers which side is supported by the greater number of experiments: To that side he inclines, with doubt and hesitation; and when at last he fixes his judgment, the evidence exceeds not what we properly call *probability*. All probability, then, supposes an

opposition of experiments and observations, where the one side is found to overbalance the other, and to produce a degree of evidence proportioned to the superiority. A hundred instances or experiments on one side, and fifty on another, afford a doubtful expectation of any event ; though a hundred uniform experiments, with only one that is contradictory, reasonably beget a pretty strong degree of assurance. In all cases, we must balance the opposite experiments, where they are opposite, and deduct the smaller number from the greater, in order to know the exact force of the superior evidence.

To apply these principles to a particular instance, we may observe, that there is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eye witnesses and spectators. This species of reasoning, perhaps, one may deny to be founded on the relation of cause and effect. I shall not dispute about a word. It will be sufficient to observe, that our assurance in any argument of this kind, is derived from no other principle than our observation of the veracity of human testimony, and of the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses. It being a general maxim that no objects have any discoverable connection together, and that all the inferences which we can draw from one to another, are founded merely

ly on our experience of their constant and regular conjunction; it is evident, that we ought not to make an exception to this maxim in favour of human testimony, whose connection with any event seems, in itself, as little necessary as any other. Were not the memory tenacious to a certain degree; had not men commonly an inclination to truth and a principle of probity; were they not sensible to shame, when detected in a falsehood: Were not these, I say, discovered by *experience* to be qualities inherent in human nature, we should never repose the least confidence in human testimony. A man delirious, or noted for falsehood and villainy, has no manner of authority with us.

And, as the evidence, derived from witnesses and human testimony, is founded on past experience, so it varies with the experience, and is regarded either as a *proof* or a *probability*, according as the conjunction between any particular kind of report, and any kind of object, has been found to be constant or variable. There are a number of circumstances to be taken into consideration in all judgments of this kind; and the ultimate standard, by which we determine all disputes that may arise concerning them, is always derived from experience and observation. Where this experience is not entirely uniform on any side, it is attended with an unavoidable contrariety in our judgments, and with

the same opposition and mutual destruction of argument as in every other kind of evidence. We frequently hesitate concerning the reports of others. We balance the opposite circumstances which cause any doubt or uncertainty; and when we discover a superiority on any side, we incline to it; but still with a diminution of assurance, in proportion to the force of its antagonist.

This contrariety of evidence, in the present case, may be derived from several different causes, from the opposition of contrary testimony, from the character or number of the witnesses, from the manner of their delivering their testimony, or from the union of all these circumstances. We entertain a suspicion concerning any matter of fact, when the witnesses contradict each other; when they are but few, or of a doubtful character; when they have an interest in what they affirm; when they deliver their testimony with hesitation, or, on the contrary, with too violent asseverations. There are many other particulars of the same kind, which may diminish or destroy the force of any argument derived from human testimony.

Suppose, for instance, that the fact, which the testimony endeavours to establish, partakes of the extraordinary and the marvellous, in that case the evidence resulting from the testimony admits of a diminution
greater

greater or less, in proportion as the fact is more or less unusual. The reason why we place any credit in witnesses and historians, is not derived from any *connection* which we perceive, *à priori*, between testimony and reality, but because we are accustomed to find a conformity between them. But when the fact attested is such a one as has seldom fallen under our observation, here is a contest of two opposite experiences, of which the one destroys the other as far as its force goes; and the superior can only operate on the mind by the force which remains. The very same principle of experience which gives us a certain degree of assurance in the testimony of witnesses, gives us also, in this case, another degree of assurance against the fact which they endeavour to establish; from which contradiction there necessarily arises a counterpoise, and mutual destruction of belief and authority.

I should not believe such a story were it told me by CATO, was a proverbial saying in ROME, even during the lifetime of that philosophical patriot*. The incredibility of a fact, it was allowed, might invalidate so great an authority.

The INDIAN prince, who refused to believe the first relations concerning the effects of frost, reasoned justly; and it naturally required very strong testimony

* PLUTARCH in vita Catonis.

to engage his assent to facts that arose from a state of nature with which he was unacquainted, and which bore so little analogy to those events of which he had constant and uniform experience. Though they were not contrary to his experience, they were not conformable to it.

But in order to encrease the probability against the testimony of witnesses, let us suppose, that the fact which they affirm, instead of being only marvellous, is really miraculous; and suppose also that the testimony, considered apart and in itself, amounts to an entire proof, in that case, there is proof against proof, of which the strongest must prevail, but still with a diminution of its force, in proportion to that of its antagonist.

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. Why is it more than probable that all men must die; that lead cannot of itself remain suspended in the air; that fire consumes wood, and is extinguished by water; unless it be, that these events are found agreeable to the laws of nature, and there is required a violation of these laws, or, in other words, a miracle to prevent them? Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happen in the common course of nature. It is no miracle that

that a man seemingly in good health should die on a sudden; because such a kind of death, though more unusual than any other, has yet been frequently observed to happen. But it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country. There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as an uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full *proof* from the nature of the fact against the existence of any miracle; nor can such a proof be destroyed, or the miracle rendered credible, but by an opposite proof, which is superior.

The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), “ That no testimony
 “ is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testi-
 “ mony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would
 “ be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavours to establish: And even in that case there is
 “ a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior
 “ only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree
 “ of force which remains after deducting the inferior.” When any one tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact which he relates should really have happened. I weigh

weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous than the event which he relates, then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.

P A R T II.

IN the foregoing reasoning we have supposed that the testimony, upon which a miracle is founded, may possibly amount to an entire proof, and that the falsehood of that testimony would be a real prodigy: But it is easy to shew, that we have been a great deal too liberal in our concession, and that there never was a miraculous event established on so full an evidence.

For, *first*, There is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men of such unquestionable good sense, education, and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves; of such undoubted integrity, as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others; of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind, as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood; and at the same

same time, attesting facts performed in such a public manner, and in so celebrated a part of the world, as to render the detection unavoidable: All which circumstances are requisite to give us a full assurance in the testimony of men.

Secondly, We may observe in human nature a principle, which, if strictly examined, will be found to diminish extremely the assurance which we might, from human testimony, have in any kind of prodigy. The maxim, by which we commonly conduct ourselves, in our reasonings, is, that the objects of which we have no experience, resemble those of which we have; that what we have found to be more usual is always most probable; and that where there is an opposition of arguments, we ought to give the preference to such as are founded on the greatest number of past observations: But, though in proceeding by this rule, we readily reject any fact which is unusual and incredible in an ordinary degree, yet, in advancing farther, the mind observes not always the same rule; but when any thing is affirmed utterly absurd and miraculous, it rather the more readily admits of such a fact, upon account of that very circumstance which ought to destroy all its authority. The passion of *surprise* and *wonder*, arising from miracles, being an agreeable emotion, gives a sensible tendency towards the belief of those events from which it is derived. And this goes so far, that
even

even those who cannot enjoy this pleasure immediately, nor can believe those miraculous events of which they are informed, yet love to partake of the satisfaction at second-hand or by rebound, and place a pride and delight in exciting the admiration of others.

With what greediness are the miraculous accounts of travellers received, their description of sea and land monsters, their relations of wonderful adventures, strange men, and uncouth manners? But if the spirit of religion join itself to the love of wonder, there is an end of common sense; and human testimony, in these circumstances, loses all pretensions to authority. A religionist may be an enthusiast, and imagine he sees what has no reality: He may know his narrative to be false, and yet persevere in it with the best intentions in the world, for the sake of promoting so holy a cause: Or even where this delusion has not place, vanity, excited by so strong a temptation, operates on him more powerfully than on the rest of mankind in any other circumstances, and self-interest with equal force. His auditors may not have, and commonly have not, sufficient judgment to canvass his evidence: What judgment they have, they renounce by principle, in these sublime and mysterious subjects: Or if they were ever so willing to employ it, passion, and a heated imagination, disturb the regularity of its operations.

operations. Their credulity increases his impudence; and his impudence overpowers their credulity.

Eloquence, when at its highest pitch, leaves little room for reason or reflection; but addressing itself entirely to the fancy or the affections; captivates the willing hearers, and subdues their understanding. Happily, this pitch it seldom attains. But what a TULLY or a DEMOSTHENES could scarcely effect over a ROMAN or ATHENIAN audience, every *Capuchin*, every itinerant or stationary teacher can perform over the generality of mankind, and in a higher degree, by touching such gross and vulgar passions.

The many instances of forged miracles and prophecies, and supernatural events, which, in all ages, have either been detected by contrary evidence, or which detect themselves by their absurdity, prove sufficiently the strong propensity of mankind to the extraordinary and the marvellous, and ought reasonably to beget a suspicion against all relations of this kind. This is our natural way of thinking, even with regard to the most common and most credible events. For instance, there is no kind of report which rises so easily, and spreads so quickly, especially in country places and provincial towns, as those concerning marriages: insomuch that two
young

young persons of equal condition never see each other twice, but the whole neighbourhood immediately join them together. The pleasure of telling a piece of news so interesting, of propagating it, and of being the first reporters of it, spreads the intelligence. And this is so well known, that no man of sense gives attention to these reports, till he find them confirmed by some greater evidence. Do not the same passions, and others still stronger, incline the generality of mankind to believe and report, with the greatest vehemence and assurance, all religious miracles?

Thirdly. It forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations, that they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations; or if a civilized people has ever given admission to any of them, that people will be found to have received them from ignorant and barbarous ancestors, who transmitted them with that inviolable sanction and authority which always attend received opinions. When we peruse the first histories of all nations, we are apt to imagine ourselves transported into some new world; where the whole frame of nature is disjointed, and every element performs its operations in a different manner from what it does at present. Battles, revolutions, pestilence, famine, and death, are never the effect of those natural causes which we experience. Prodiges,

gies, omens, oracles, judgments, quite obscure the few natural events that are intermingled with them. But as the former grow thinner every page, in proportion as we advance nearer the enlightened ages, we soon learn, that there is nothing mysterious or supernatural in the case, but that all proceeds from the usual propensity of mankind towards the marvellous; and that though this inclination may at intervals receive a check from sense and learning, it can never be thoroughly extirpated from human nature.

It is strange, a judicious reader is apt to say, upon the perusal of these wonderful historians, *that such prodigious events never happen in our days*. But it is nothing strange, I hope, that men should lie in all ages. You must surely have seen instances enow of that frailty. You have yourself heard many such marvellous relations started, which, being treated with scorn by all the wise and judicious, have at last been abandoned even by the vulgar. Be assured, that those renowned lies, which have spread and flourished to such a monstrous height, arose from like beginnings; but being sown in a more proper soil, shot up at last into prodigies almost equal to those which they relate.

It was a wise policy in that false prophet ALEXANDER, who, though now forgotten, was once so famous,

famous, to lay the first scene of his impostures in PAPHLAGONIA, where, as LUCIAN tells us, the people were extremely ignorant and stupid, and ready to swallow even the grossest delusion. People at a distance, who are weak enough to think the matter at all worth enquiry, have no opportunity of receiving better information. The stories come magnified to them by a hundred circumstances. Fools are industrious in propagating the imposture; while the wise and learned are contented, in general, to deride its absurdity, without informing themselves of the particular facts by which it may be distinctly refuted. And thus the impostor above mentioned was enabled to proceed, from his ignorant PAPHLAGONIANS, to the enlisting of votaries, even among the GRECIAN philosophers, and men of the most eminent rank and distinction in ROME. Nay, could engage the attention of that sage emperor MARCUS AURELIUS; so far as to make him trust the success of a military expedition to his delusive prophecies.

The advantages are so great, of starting an imposture among an ignorant people, that even though the delusion should be too gross to impose on the generality of them (*which, though seldom, is sometimes the case*), it has a much better chance for succeeding in remote countries, than if the first scene had been laid in a city renowned for arts and knowledge. The most ignorant and barbarous of these barbarians

carry

carry the report abroad. None of their countrymen have a large correspondence, or sufficient credit and authority to contradict and beat down the delusion. Mens inclination to the marvellous has full opportunity to display itself. And thus a story, which is universally exploded in the place where it was first started, shall pass for certain at a thousand miles distance. But had ALEXANDER fixed his residence at ATHENS, the philosophers of that renowned mart of learning had immediately spread, throughout the whole ROMAN empire, their sense of the matter; which, being supported by so great authority, and displayed by all the force of reason and eloquence, had entirely opened the eyes of mankind. It is true, LUCIAN, passing by chance through PAPHLAGONIA, had an opportunity of performing this good office. But though much to be wished, it does not always happen, that every ALEXANDER meets with a LUCIAN, ready to expose and detect his impostures.

I may add as a *fourth* reason, which diminishes the authority of prodigies, that there is no testimony for any, even those which have not been expressly detected, that is not opposed by an infinite number of witnesses; so that not only the miracle destroys the credit of testimony, but the testimony destroys itself. To make this the better understood, let us consider, that, in matters of religion, what-

ever is different is contrary; and that it is impossible the religions of ancient ROME, of TURKEY, of SIAM, and of CHINA, should all of them be established on on any solid foundation. Every miracle, therefore, pretended to have been wrought in any of these religions (and all of them abound in miracles), as its direct scope is to establish the particular system to which it is attributed, so has it the same force, though more indirectly, to overthrow every other system. In destroying a rival system, it likewise destroys the credit of those miracles on which that system was established; so that all the prodigies of different religions are to be regarded as contrary facts; and the evidences of these prodigies, whether weak or strong, as opposite to each other. According to this method of reasoning, when we believe any miracle of MAHOMET or his successors, we have for our warrant the testimony of a few barbarous ARABIANS: And, on the other hand, we are to regard the authority of TITUS LIVIUS, PLUTARCH, TACITUS, and in short, of all all the authors and witnesses, GRECIAN, CHINESE, and ROMAN CATHOLIC, who have related any miracle in their particular religion; I say, we are to regard their testimony in the same light as if they had mentioned that MAHOMETAN miracle, and had in express terms contradicted it, with the same certainty as they have for the miracle they relate. This argument may appear over subtle and refined; but is not in reality different

ferent from the reasoning of a judge, who supposes, that the credit of two witnesses, maintaining a crime against any one, is destroyed by the testimony of two others, who affirm him to have been two hundred leagues distant, at the same instant when the crime is said to have been committed.

One of the best attested miracles in all profane history, is that which TACITUS reports of VESPASIAN, who cured a blind man in ALEXANDRIA by means of his spittle, and a lame man by the mere touch of his foot; in obedience to a vision of the god SERAPIS, who had enjoined them to have recourse to the Emperor for these miraculous cures. The story may be seen in that fine historian*, where every circumstance seems to add weight to the testimony, and might be displayed at large with all the force of argument and eloquence, if any one were now concerned to enforce the evidence of that exploded and idolatrous superstition. The gravity, solidity, age, and probity of so great an emperor, who, through the whole course of his life, conversed in a familiar manner with his friends and courtiers, and never affected those extraordinary airs of divinity assumed by ALEXANDER and DEMETRIUS. The historian, a cotemporary writer, noted for candour and veracity, and with all the greatest and most

* Hist. lib. v. cap. 8. SUTONIUS gives nearly the same account in *vita VESP.*

so free from any tendency to credulity, that he even penetrated genius, perhaps, of all antiquity; and lies under the contrary imputation, of atheism and prophaneness: The persons, from whose authority he related the miracle, of established character for judgment and veracity, as we may well presume, eye-witnesses of the fact, and confirming their testimony, after the FLAVIAN family was despoiled of the empire, and could no longer give any reward as the price of a lie. *Utrumque, que interfuere, nunc, quoque memorant, postquam nullum mendacio pretium.* To which if we had the public nature of the facts, as related, it will appear, that no evidence can well be supposed stronger for so gross and so palpable a falsehood.

There is also a memorable story related by Cardinal DE RETZ, which may well deserve our consideration. When that intriguing politician fled into SPAIN, to avoid the persecution of his enemies, he passed through SARAGOSSA, the capital of ARRAGON, where he was shewn in the cathedral a man, who had served seven years as a door-keeper, and was well known to every body in town that had ever paid his devotions at that church. He had been seen, for so long a time, wanting a leg, but recovered that limb by the rubbing of holy oil upon the stump; and the cardinal assures us, that he saw him with two legs. This miracle was vouched by all the canons of the church; and the whole company in town were appealed to for a confirmation of the fact,

fact, whom the cardinal found, by their zealous devotion, to be thorough believers of the miracle. Here the relater was also cotemporary to the supposed prodigy, of an incredulous and libertine character, as well as of great genius; the miracle of so *singular* a nature as could scarcely admit of a counterfeit, and the witnesses very numerous, and all of them in a manner spectators of the fact to which they gave their testimony. And what adds mightily to the force of the evidence, and may double our surprise on this occasion, is, that the cardinal himself, who relates the story, seems not to give any credit to it, and consequently cannot be suspected of any concurrence in the holy fraud. He considered justly, that it was not requisite, in order to reject a fact of this nature, to be able accurately to disprove the testimony, and to trace its falsehood, through all the circumstances of knavery and credulity which produced it. He knew, that, as this was commonly altogether impossible at any small distance of time and place, so was it extremely difficult, even where one was immediately present, by reason of the bigotry, ignorance, cunning, and roguery of a great part of mankind. He therefore concluded, like a just reasoner, that such an evidence carried falsehood upon the very face of it; and that a miracle, supported by any human testimony, was more properly a subject of derision than of argument.

There surely never was a greater number of miracles ascribed to one person, than those which were lately said to have been wrought in France upon the tomb of Abbé PARIS, the famous JANSENIST, with whose sanctity the people were so long deluded. The curing of the sick, giving hearing to the deaf, and sight to the blind, were every where talked of as the usual effects of that holy sepulchre. But what is more extraordinary, many of the miracles were immediately proved upon the spot, before judges of unquestioned integrity, attested by witnesses of credit and distinction, in a learned age, and on the most eminent theatre that is now in the world. Nor is this all: A relation of them was published and dispersed every where; nor were the *Jesuits*, though a learned body, supported by the civil magistrate, and determined enemies to those opinions, in whose favour the miracles were said to have been wrought, ever able distinctly to refute or detect them. Where shall we find such a number of circumstances, agreeing to the corroboration of one fact? And what have we to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses, but the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events which they relate? And this, surely, in the eyes of all reasonable people, will alone be regarded as a sufficient refutation.

Is the consequence just, because some human testimony has the utmost force and authority in some cases,

cases, when it relates the battle of PHILIPPI or PHARSALIA for instance; that therefore all kinds of testimony, must, in all cases, have equal force and authority? Suppose that the CÆSARIAN and POMPEIAN factions had each of them claimed the victory in these battles, and that the historians of each party had uniformly ascribed the advantage to their own side; how could mankind, at this distance, have been able to determine between them? The contrariety is equally strong between the miracles related by HERODOTUS or PLUTARCH, and those delivered by MARIANA, BEDE, or any monkish historian.

The wise lend a very academic faith to every report which favours the passion of the reporter; whether it magnifies his country, his family, or himself, or in any other way strikes in with his natural inclinations and propensities. But what greater temptation than to appear a missionary, a prophet, an ambassador from heaven? Who would not encounter many dangers and difficulties, in order to attain so sublime a character? Or if, by the help of vanity and a heated imagination, a man has first made a convert of himself, and entered seriously into the delusion, who ever scruples to make use of pious frauds, in support of so holy and meritorious a cause?

The smallest spark may here kindle into the greatest flame; because the materials are always prepared

for it. The *avidum genus auricularum**, the gazing populace, receive greedily, without examination, whatever soothes superstition, and promotes wonder.

How many stories of this nature, have, in all ages, been detected and exploded in their infancy? How many more have been celebrated for a time, and have afterwards sunk into neglect and oblivion. Where such reports, therefore, fly about, the solution of the phenomenon is obvious; and we judge in conformity to regular experience and observation, when we account for it by the known and natural principles of credulity and delusion. And shall we, rather than have a recourse to so natural a solution, allow of a miraculous violation of the most established laws of nature.

I need not mention the difficulty of detecting a falsehood in any private or even public history, at the place where it is said to happen; much more when the scene is removed to ever so small a distance. Even a court of judicature, with all the authority, accuracy, and judgment which they can employ, find themselves often at a loss to distinguish between truth and falsehood in the most recent actions. But the matter never comes to any issue, if trusted to the common method of altercation and debate and flying rumours; especially when mens passions have taken part on either side.

* LUCRET.

In the infancy of new religions, the wise and learned commonly esteem the matter too inconsiderable to deserve their attention or regard. And when afterwards they would willingly detect the cheat, in order to undeceive the deluded multitude, the season is now past, and the records and witnesses, which might clear up the matter, have perished beyond recovery.

No means of detection remain, but those which must be drawn from the very testimony itself of the reporters: And these, though always sufficient with the judicious and knowing, are commonly too fine to fall under the comprehension of the vulgar.

Upon the whole then it appears, that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof; and that even supposing it amounted to a proof, it would be opposed by another proof, derived from the very nature of the fact which it would endeavour to establish. It is experience only which gives authority to human testimony; and it is the same experience which assures us of the laws of nature. When, therefore, these two kinds of experience are contrary, we have nothing to do but subtract the one from the other, and embrace an opinion, either on one side or the other, with that assurance which arises from the remainder. But according to the principle here explained, this subtraction,

tion, with regard to all popular religions, amounts to an entire annihilation; and therefore we may establish it as a maxim, that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion.

I beg the limitations here made may be remarked, when I say, that a miracle can never be proved, so as to be the foundation of a system of religion. For I own, that otherwise, there may possibly be miracles or violations of the usual course of nature, of such a kind as to admit of proof from human testimony; though perhaps it will be impossible to find any such in all the records of history. Thus, suppose all authors, in all languages, agree, that, from the first of JANUARY 1600, there was a total darkness over the whole earth for eight day: Suppose that the tradition of this extraordinary event is still strong and lively among the people; That all travellers, who return from foreign countries, bring us accounts of the same tradition, without the least variation or contradiction: It is evident, that our present philosophers, instead of of doubting the fact, ought to receive it as certain, and ought to search for the causes whence it might be derived. The decay, corruption, and dissolution of nature, is an event rendered probable by so many analogies, that any phænomenon which seems to have a tendency towards that catastrophe, comes within the reach

reach of human testimony, if that testimony be very extensive and uniform.

But suppose that all the historians who treat of ENGLAND should agree, that on the first of JANUARY 1600, Queen ELIZABETH died; that both before and after her death she was seen by her physicians and the whole court as is usual with persons of her rank; that her successor was acknowledged and proclaimed by the Parliament; and that, after being interred a month, she again appeared, resumed the throne, and governed ENGLAND for three year: I must confess that I should be surpris'd at the concurrence of so many odd circumstances, but should not have the least inclination to believe so miraculous an event. I should not doubt of her pretended death, and of those other public circumstances that followed it: I should only assert it to have been pretended, and that it neither was, nor possibly could be real. You would in vain object to me the difficulty, and almost impossibility, of deceiving the world in an affair of such consequence. The wisdom and solid judgment of that renowned queen, with the little or no advantage which she could reap from so poor an artifice: all this might astonish me; but I would still reply, that the knavery and folly of men are such common phenomena, that I should rather believe the most extraordinary events to arise from their concurrence, than admit of so signal a violation of the laws of nature.

But

But should this miracle be ascribed to any new system of religion; men in all ages have been so much imposed on by ridiculous stories of that kind, that this very circumstance would be a full proof of a cheat, and sufficient with all men of sense, not only to make them reject the fact, but even reject it without farther examination. Though the Being, to whom the miracle is ascribed, be in this case Almighty, it does not upon that account become a whit more probable; since it is impossible for us to know the attributes or actions of such a Being, otherwise than from the experience which we have of his productions in the usual course of nature. This still reduces us to past observation, and obliges us to compare the instances of the violation of truth in the testimony of men, with those of the violation of the laws of nature by miracles, in order to judge which of them is most likely and probable. As the violations of truth are more common in the testimony concerning religious miracles, than in that concerning any other matter of fact, this must diminish very much the authority of the former testimony, and make us form a general resolution, never to lend any attention to it, with whatever specious pretence it may be covered.

Lord BACON seems to have embraced the same principles of reasoning. " We ought (says he) to
 " make a collection or particular history of all mon-
 " sters

“ fters and prodigious births or productions, and, in
 “ a word, of every thing new, rare, and extraordi-
 “ nary in nature, But this muſt be done with the
 “ moſt ſevere ſcrutiny, leſt we depart from truth
 “ Above all, every relation muſt be conſidered as
 “ ſuſpicious which depends in any degree upon reli-
 “ gion, as the prodigies of LIVY; And no leſs ſo,
 “ every thing that is to be found in the writers of
 “ natural magic or alchymy, or ſuch authors who
 “ ſeem, all of them to have an unconquerable appe-
 “ tite for falſehood and fable*.”

I am the better pleaſed with the method of reaſon-
 ing here delivered, as I think it may ſerve to con-
 found thoſe dangerous friends or diſguiſed enemies to
 the *Chriſtian Religion* who have undertaken to defend
 it by the principles of human reaſon. Our moſt holy
 religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reaſon; and it is
 a ſure method of expoſing it to put it to ſuch a trial
 as it is by no means fitted to endure. To make this
 more evident, let us examine thoſe miracles related
 in ſcripture; and not to loſe ourſelves in too wide a
 field, let us confine ourſelves to ſuch as we find in
 the *Pentateuch*, which we ſhall examine according to
 the principles of theſe pretended Chriſtians, not as
 the word or teſtimony of God himſelf, but as the
 production of a mere human writer and hitorian.
 Here then we are firſt to conſider a book, preſented
 to us by a barbarous and ignorant people, written

* Nov. Org. lib. ii. aph. 29.

in an age when they were still more barbarous, and in all probability long after the facts which it relates; corroborated by no concurring testimony, and resembling those fabulous accounts which every nation gives of its origin. Upon reading this book, we find it full of prodigies and miracles. It gives an account of a state of the world and of human nature entirely different from the present: Of our fall from that state: Of the age of man extended to near a thousand years: Of the destruction of the world by a deluge: Of the arbitrary choice of one people, as the favourites of heaven; and that people the countrymen of the author: Of their deliverance from bondage by prodigies the most astonishing imaginable: I desire any one to lay his hand upon his heart, and after a serious consideration declare, whether he thinks that the falsehood of such a book, supported by such a testimony, would be more extraordinary and miraculous than all the miracles it relates; which is, however, necessary to make it be received according to the measures of probability above established.

What we have said of miracles may be applied, without any variation, to prophecies; and indeed, all prophecies are real miracles; and, as such only, can be admitted as proofs of any revelation. If it did not exceed the capacity of human nature to foretel future events, it would be absurd to employ
any

any prophecy as an argument for a divine mission or authority from heaven: So that upon the whole we may conclude, that the *Christian Religion* not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.

F I N I S.